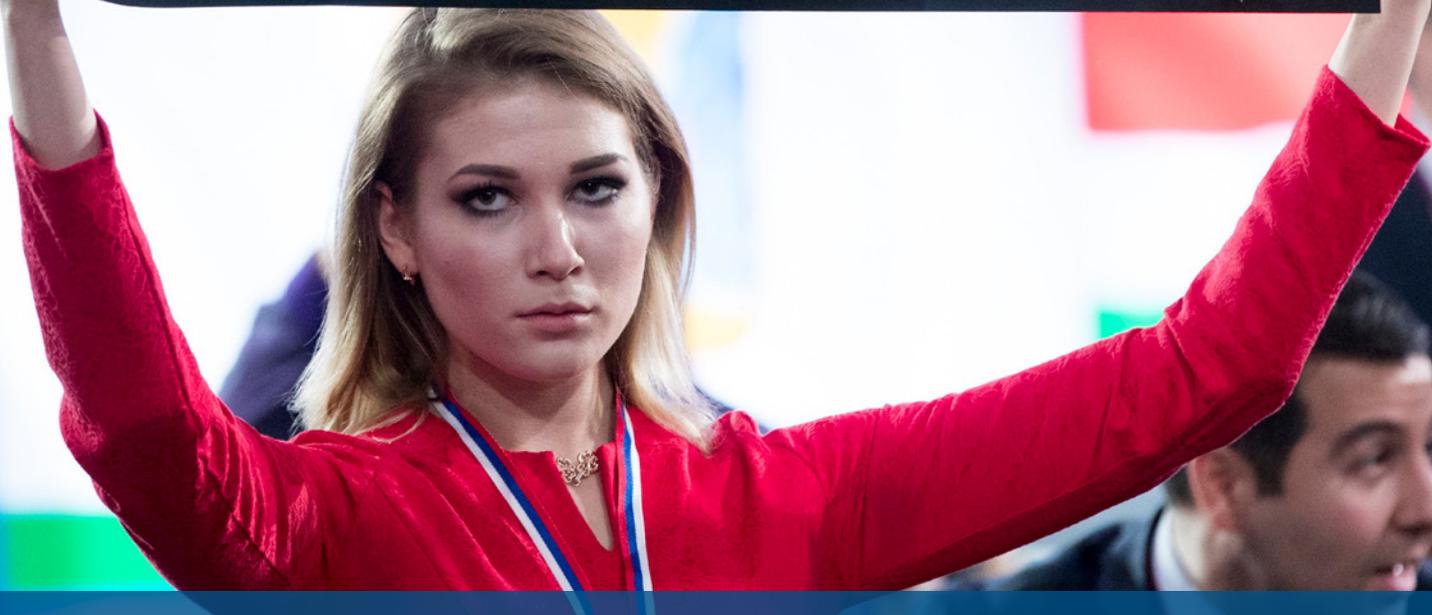


Center for American Progress



Russia's 5th Column

By Ken Gude

March 2017

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Introduction and summary

Russia's actions to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election and help then-presidential candidate Donald Trump win were similar to its activities to build a network of far-right political parties and movements in Europe. Russian President Vladimir Putin is using this network to advance his policy objectives at home and abroad.

In this effort, Russia is motivated by both the desire to lead a conservative revival against Western liberal democracies and a flawed interpretation of recent waves of popular uprisings against autocratic rulers that sees an American conspiracy behind them. Putin has adopted a deliberate strategy to directly challenge the liberal international order led by the United States. That global system helped end the historical pattern of devastating wars among major powers and brought much of the world an unprecedented era of peace and prosperity since the end of World War II.

It has been 25 years since the end of the Cold War, and many Americans have lost touch with the value of the military and political alliances that helped the United States prevail in that conflict. Russia has not. And even though it remains weak relative to the United States, Putin's Russia is aggressively pursuing its objective to weaken those political alliances to help it regain its strategic position in Europe.

The bond between the United States and European democracies, forged over the past 100 years, is built on the shared values of freedom, human rights, and the rule of law. Putin's Russia rejects all of those values. Putin oppresses or jails his political opponents, sends his assassins to murder dissidents who leave Russia, uses state-run media to suppress dissent and stifle the independent press, and mocks the rule of law as he enriches himself and his associates at the expense of the Russian people.

Putin is now trying to export his brand of leadership. He has formed an alliance with many European far-right political parties and their leaders, who have delivered consistent adherence to Russian interests even when it contradicts some of their past positions. This backing of Putin is hard to explain unless it is in exchange for Putin's overt and covert support. These far-right parties are

capitalizing on economic and security crises in Europe to build popular support and now operate as a fifth column that is undermining the Western liberal order from within. President Donald Trump's unwavering support for Putin and his pursuit of policies that advance Russia's goals show disturbing similarities to the European far right that are equally difficult to rationalize.

This report examines Russia's efforts to support far-right parties in Europe; identifies the ideological and strategic motivations for its actions; and provides case studies on seven political parties in six countries that either have held elections recently or will hold them within the next year. The report also includes key findings and recommendations that are summarized below.

Key findings

- Russia's covert influence operations are not simply mischief. Rather, they are a deliberate strategy to achieve its domestic and foreign policy objectives through unconventional means that has ideological, political, and strategic support from a broad section of leading Russian intellectual, government, and military figures.
- Russia deploys an array of tools to help its designated partners, actions that range from the relatively benign practice of elevating the profile of European far-right leaders to disinformation, propaganda, alleged illicit financing, and covert influence operations.
- Russia, in return, obtains a strikingly consistent level of support from these far-right, nationalist leaders, who all praise Putin as a strong leader and promote Russian policy objectives, even if it works against their own national interests and when the parties have no history of backing similar actions not related to Russia.
- President Donald Trump is following the same playbook as the Russian-backed far-right European leaders, adopting eerily similar language to theirs and pursuing the same policies that advance Russia's objectives even when they are inconsistent with previous Republican policy positions. Trump or top Trump administration officials even met with four of these European far-right leaders during the presidential campaign or the transition.

Recommendations

- Keep in place sanctions imposed on Russia both for its actions in Crimea and for targeting the U.S. election if Russian influence operations continue in Europe.
- Impose new sanctions on Russia if it interferes in upcoming European elections.
- Congress should pass legislation imposing sanctions on Russia if the Trump administration is unwilling to act to punish and deter Russia.
- Congress should require the director of national intelligence to submit an annual report that details Russia's influence operations targeting democracies.
- NATO should form a Committee on Democracy to develop strategies to protect the integrity of democratic institutions in member states.
- Establish a joint U.S.-EU Commission on Protecting Democracy to share information and develop strategies to defend against Russian attacks on democratic institutions.
- Create a bipartisan, independent commission to thoroughly investigate and issue a public report on Russia's actions targeting the U.S. presidential election.
- Appoint a Special Counsel to investigate Trump officials because the American people can have no confidence that the Trump administration can be trusted to investigate itself.

The shared values of Americans and Europeans have again made them a target for those who reject those values. Just as governments and populations on both sides of the Atlantic rallied in mutual defense of our security following terrorist attacks in Paris, San Bernardino, Orlando, and Berlin, we too must rise to meet the common challenge to our democracies. To be sure, this is not the beginning of a new Cold War with Russia. However, if we fail to take action to protect the core institutions of our democracies, we will weaken ourselves and strengthen our adversaries, making future conflict more likely, not less.

Eurasianism

The ideological basis for Russian support of the European far right

Russian intellectual Alexander Dugin is the main architect of the neo-Russian imperialism called Eurasianism. In a series of lectures, articles, and books, Dugin has sought to “rehabilitate fascism in Russia.”¹ He has borrowed from obscure 19th and 20th century political theories, adopted a sympathetic interpretation of Nazism that attempts to separate it from the Holocaust, and sought to thwart what he and many Russians believe is a conspiracy led by the United States to contain Russia.² Dugin has called for a “Russian spring” and the domination of Europe through Ukraine.³

Dugin views Russia as leading a Eurasian conservative revival that, according to scholar and political commentator Matthew d’Ancona of Queen Mary University in London, “supports tradition against liberalism, autocracy against democratic institutions, [and] stern uniformity against Enlightenment pluralism.”⁴ The conservatism that Dugin describes is, in his words, “not the same as the U.S. version, which values a small state. Here, conservatives value undivided political power, with economic power rooted in and subordinate to it.”⁵

Eurasianism takes these ideological foundations and overlays them onto a geographic interpretation of political conflict. For Dugin, most of history can be lumped into a conflict between a more liberal maritime alliance, called Atlantis, against the conservative land-based Eurasian societies.⁶ This is shockingly similar to the fictional dystopian totalitarian states of Oceania and Eurasia in George Orwell’s *1984*. This is no accident, as Orwell and Dugin drew inspiration from similar historical theorists, though Orwell viewed with horror what Dugin seeks to build upon.⁷

Dugin’s book *The Foundations of Geopolitics*, published in 1997, “became a pole star for a broad section of Russian hardliners,” according to Russia scholar Charles Clover.⁸ John Dunlop, an expert on the Russian political right at the Hoover Institution, says of Dugin’s book, “there has probably not been another book published in Russia during the post-communist period which has exerted a comparable influence on Russian military, police, and statist foreign policy elites.”⁹

Dugin's views are certainly consistent with Russian military action in Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014, and Syria over the past two years.¹⁰

In Dugin's latest book, *The Fourth Political Theory*, he seeks to create a defining ideology for Eurasianism, which is, in his words, an alliance from "Lisbon to Vladivostok" that is a "genuine, true, radically revolutionary and consistent, fascist fascism."¹¹ It calls for a "global crusade against the United States, the West, globalization, and their political-ideological expression, liberalism," and ultimately, "the American empire should be destroyed."¹²

Dugin began building a network of contacts among Europe's far right in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He traveled to France in 1989 and then again in 1992 and built connections with the at the time still young Front National of Jean-Marie Le Pen.¹³ Dugin hosted conferences with Front National officials through the 1990s and 2000s, and one official even joined the editorial board of his journal, *Elementary*.¹⁴ Dugin's ties to the Italian far right are more extensive, with close links between Italy and Russia during Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's tenure "enabl[ing] the synergy between Italian and Russian far right groups."¹⁵

In the United States, however, Dugin is practically a complete unknown, and when he is mentioned, like he was recently by *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, he is typically described as "Putin's ideologist" or something similar.¹⁶ But according to Marlene Laruelle, editor of the recent book *Eurasianism and the European Far Right*, Westerners must avoid "the trap of assuming that Dugin is Putin's "guru" and that the relationship is "more a marriage of convenience than one of true love."¹⁷ Regardless of how deep the bond goes, the reality according to Laruelle is that "in Europe the Kremlin has recently acquired more or less the same allies that Dugin has cultivated for more than two decades."¹⁸

Putin's motivations for supporting the European far right

Russian President Vladimir Putin is no radical ideologue. He is a ruthless strongman who, during his first two terms as president, was more defined by pragmatism than recklessness.¹⁹ And it's not completely gone—Russia simultaneously worked with the United States and other Western powers to secure the Iranian nuclear agreement, while at the same time Putin was involved in a major confrontation with those same powers over Russia's actions in Ukraine and Crimea. This differentiation of approaches with Western powers shows Putin still has a pragmatic streak.

It is clear that something changed in Putin from how he governed through his first two terms that ended in 2008 prior to winning a new term as president in March 2012. He has taken a far more aggressive approach in his third term than he had previously. Russia's brazen move to invade and annex Crimea and the direct intervention in Syria are the prime examples. There are likely many causes that stretch well back into the history of post-Cold War U.S.-Russia relations, but three events clearly shaped how Putin would see the threats to Russia and what tools he could use to combat them.

The first is the series of popular movements that overthrew autocratic regimes in three former Soviet republics, known as the color revolutions. These all occurred while Putin was president the first go-round—the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005.²⁰

The Russians do not view these uprisings as spontaneous events but rather as part of a conspiracy by the United States and European countries to challenge Russia's near abroad—the independent states that emerged after the fall of the Soviet Union. In 2014, scholar Anthony Cordesman attended a Russian government security conference at which the Russians presented the view that the color revolutions represented “a new US and European approach to warfare that focuses on creating destabilizing revolutions in other states as a means of serving their security interests at low cost and with minimal casualties.”²¹

The second event was the Arab Spring, another wave of popular uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East that began in Tunisia in late 2010 and spread in 2011 to Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria.²² The Russians, according to Cordesman, hold a view of the origins of these revolts that is similar to their view of the color revolutions. From the same conference, he says, “[k]ey Russian officers and officials presented a view of the US and the West as deliberately destabilizing nations in North Africa, the Middle East, and the rest of the world for their own ends.”²³

And finally, in December 2011, there were protests around Russia's parliamentary elections that witnessed approximately 25,000 people on the streets of Moscow, an unprecedented show of opposition to Putin that had not occurred since he assumed the presidency in late 1999.²⁴ These protests clearly shook Putin, and he intimated that the United States was behind the uprising and was following the same playbook as it had in the color revolutions and the

Arab Spring. He even accused then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton of giving opposition leaders “the signal,” who then “with the support of the US State department began active work.”²⁵ This cemented Putin’s animosity toward Secretary Clinton, which was one of the drivers behind his aggressive push to interfere in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

As the conference that Cordesman attended made clear, Putin was not alone in his assessment of the United States and the West fomenting popular unrest in countries as another means of warfare. In 2013, the Russian military chief of the general staff, Gen. Valery Gerasimov, developed a new theory of what he described as nonlinear war based on the belief that the color revolutions and the Arab Spring were a new model being employed by the United States to achieve its foreign policy objectives.²⁶ Gen. Gerasimov wrote that the “role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness.”²⁷

Gen. Gerasimov’s analysis, often called the Gerasimov Doctrine, is not really a doctrine, nor was it ever intended to be.²⁸ Its tenets were certainly deployed to great effect during the invasion and annexation of Crimea and the subsequent fighting in eastern Ukraine.²⁹ But it is not as if Russia has abandoned more traditional forms of military force, as the intervention in Syria shows.³⁰

All of this came together during a new round of popular unrest in Ukraine that began in November 2013 following its withdrawal from an association agreement with the European Union and ultimately forced the pro-Russia Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich to flee the country in February 2014.³¹ That prompted Putin to go into action, organizing a plan to, in his words, “begin the work to bring [the Ukrainian region of] Crimea back into Russia.”³² Russia’s relationship with Europe has not been the same since.

Putin is using this new toolkit to achieve very specific goals. First, he is seeking allies to provide him political cover that can be used both domestically and internationally. This network of “far-right political leaders praise Putin’s aggressive foreign policy in public,” according to Alina Polyakova of the Atlantic Council.³³ Representatives of far-right parties have served as election observers in Crimea, recognized Crimea’s annexation, and spoken against Western governments encroaching on Russia’s interests.³⁴

The second Putin objective is to use these far-right parties to weaken political consensus in the West and undermine the institutions that support the liberal international order that Russia views as a threat. As Antonis Klapsis of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies writes, “pro-Russian far-right parties can act as Trojan horses for the Kremlin in its attempts to undermine the internal cohesion of the EU and NATO.”³⁵ One need look no further than the successful campaign by pro-Russia Nigel Farage and his U.K. Independence Party to get Britain to withdraw from the European Union. This burgeoning fifth column will be examined at length in the next section.

Pro-Russian European far-right political parties

Some of Russia's activities in support of far-right political parties occur in the open and are typically entirely legitimate forms of international engagement even if they are pushing policies and messages that are inconsistent with liberal democratic values. The Kremlin arranges large international conferences, mostly in Russia, to bring together like-minded political leaders from across the continent to share strategies, messages, and tactics. It seeks to elevate far-right leaders—and obtain a measure of political cover—by inviting them to high-profile meetings with Russian leaders. It gives far-right politicians airtime on its television networks. And it has even provided indirect financing in some cases.

The toolkit does not end there, however, and Russia frequently engages in influence and propaganda operations targeting public debate and the political process. Disinformation campaigns using fake material are also sometimes used. Additionally, there are allegations that several European far-right political parties receive covert funding from Russia, though no public evidence has emerged to prove those charges and the parties involved deny it.³⁶

What follows in the wake of these activities is a striking alignment among these far-right parties in favor of Russian objectives. There is near-universal praise of Putin as a strong leader. Each of these parties denigrates its domestic political leadership and European institutions in eerily similar language. They all support lifting EU sanctions on Russia even though there is little, if any, evidence that they have opposed other EU sanctions nor clear indication of the benefits for their own countries. These parties blame the European Union and NATO for precipitating the Ukraine crisis. They back Russia's actions in Syria and its so-called fight against the Islamic State. Researchers at the Institute for Modern Russia have calculated that members of the European Parliament, or MEPs, that belong to the pro-Russian Nations and Freedoms group of European MEPs in the Parliament vote in favor of Russian interests 93 percent of the time.³⁷

There is far too much consistency in these positions across these parties for it to simply be the result of ideological convergence or admiration for Putin's leadership style. When assessed in the context of the Kremlin's interpretation of the color revolutions and the Arab Spring, it appears there is a strategy unfolding of Russian overt and covert support for far-right parties that then become a fifth column helping advance key Russian objectives from inside Russia's European adversaries.

The following sections examine seven far-right parties in six countries, each of which had major elections in 2016 or have upcoming elections in 2017 or early 2018. This is not the complete list of countries and parties that the Russians are targeting; rather, it focuses on countries in Western Europe with recent or upcoming elections. Russian influence operations appear to have targeted or are targeting each of these countries around these elections, and far-right parties are gaining ground in each of these nations.

Front National

The French Front National, or FN, is the party aligned with Russia perhaps closest to power in Europe. The far-right party now led by Marine Le Pen is clearly the third-largest party in France, behind the ruling Socialist Party and the center-right Republicans. But it has been consistently gaining ground, and Le Pen is virtually assured of making the final round runoff of the French presidential election in May 2017.

If that occurs, it would not be the first time the FN reached the second round. In 2002, the FN's founder Jean-Marie Le Pen, father of Marine, reached the second round but ultimately lost badly to conservative Jacques Chirac in the runoff.³⁸ Jean-Marie Le Pen formed the party in 1972 as an heir to the Nazi-collaborating Vichy era on an avowedly anti-Semitic and racist platform.³⁹ The elder Le Pen has his own ties with Russia, earning the support of Russian ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, and as noted above, many FN officials engaged with Alexander Dugin in the 1990s.⁴⁰ For her part, Marine has sought to reform the image of the FN and has used a high-profile fight with her father over his repeated comments minimizing the Holocaust and praising Vichy France as a means to expel him from the party.⁴¹

Marine Le Pen traveled to Russia in 2013 and 2014, meeting with Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin and the chairman of the State Duma—Russia's legislature—Sergei Naryshkin, on the first trip.⁴² It has been reported in France that she met with Putin secretly in February 2014, though that has not been confirmed.⁴³

However, the FN did receive a critical loan in 2014 from a Russian-owned bank to help finance its successful municipal election campaign.⁴⁴

Marine Le Pen's foreign policy positions have been entirely in line with Russia's. She has backed its actions in Crimea, saying that if elected president, France would recognize Russia's control of the territory.⁴⁵ She has supported Russia's actions in Syria and suggested that as president, she would form a Franco-Russian alliance to fight the Islamic State.⁴⁶ And she has pledged to hold a referendum in France on withdrawal from the European Union and has threatened to withdraw from NATO.⁴⁷

She has repeatedly praised Putin's leadership, saying in 2014, "I think (Putin) puts the interests of Russia and the Russian people first ... A lot of things are said about Russia because for years it has been demonised on U.S. orders."⁴⁸ Marine Le Pen even defended Russia from allegations of hacking during the 2016 U.S. election, saying in January 2017, "I don't think there is any serious proof behind these allegations of cyber-attacks. We should only consider real revelations. In any case, we can't say that it was [Moscow] that was behind this cyber-attack."⁴⁹

Russian media outlets are working to help Le Pen as she deals with the surging centrist candidate Emmanuel Macron, who is even ahead of her in some national polls.⁵⁰ Russian state media outlets jumped all over—and may have been the source of—rumors that Macron had an extramarital affair with a man.⁵¹ And even WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has inserted himself in the race, leveling the odd accusation to the Russian outlet Izvestia that Macron is an American agent and has links to Hillary Clinton.⁵² With just more than a month to go before the first round of the presidential election, Russia is pulling out all the stops to help Le Pen win.

Alternative für Deutschland

Russia is making fast inroads into German politics too, forging close ties with the far-right Alternative für Deutschland, or AfD, party. The party, just three years old, was born in reaction to the Eurozone crisis with a mostly economic message rejecting Germany financing the rescue package for Greece.⁵³ But the AfD quickly adopted its message and policies to blend its Euroscepticism with xenophobia to capitalize on the emerging refugee and migrant crisis that engulfed Germany beginning in 2014.⁵⁴

There are allegations, unproven and denied by the AfD, that Russia was providing covert funding to the group by helping it sell cheap gold bars.⁵⁵ But ahead of regional elections, the AfD received an anonymous in-kind contribution of thousands of election signs and millions of copies of its campaign newspaper to distribute to its supporters.⁵⁶ The provenance of this gift is not publicly known, but not even AfD officials will rule out that it came from Russia.⁵⁷

The so-called Lisa affair is another way the Russians have helped their allies in Germany. In late January 2016, a 13-year-old ethnic Russian girl was allegedly gang-raped by three migrants near where she lived in Berlin.⁵⁸ Russian media pushed the story on all of its networks and on social media, emphasizing the ethnicity of the alleged attackers, drawing tens of thousands of protesters into the streets across Germany.⁵⁹ German police quickly concluded that the incident never occurred and the girl had simply run away from home and concocted the story to cover her tracks.⁶⁰ Russian media pounced on this as a German cover-up, even drawing a remarkable public rebuke from Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.⁶¹

This episode played on growing anti-immigrant sentiment in Germany and coincidentally occurred in the weeks ahead of key regional elections in three German states. The AfD shocked many across Germany and Europe by making surprisingly strong showings, gaining as much as 24 percent of the vote in one of the states, the best showing for a far-right party in Germany since the end of World War II.⁶² The AfD did not even exist the last time these states voted, so it's a remarkable result for a party with no history with these voters.⁶³

The AfD has surged to 15 percent of the vote in national polls ahead of German national elections in September 2017, gaining even more momentum following the Christmas market terrorist attack.⁶⁴ There is very little chance that the AfD could win or even join a coalition government, but there is no doubt it is already strong—and appears to be getting stronger. The head of Germany's foreign intelligence service, Bruno Kahl, has publicly warned that the Russians could target the German elections with the goal of “delegitimising the democratic process.”⁶⁵ This follows a similar statement from the head of the German domestic intelligence agency, Hans-Georg Maaßen, warning of “the willingness of Russian intelligence to carry out sabotage.”⁶⁶

AfD leaders frequently appear at conferences and meeting with Russian officials. At one such gathering in early 2016 in Crimea, Marcus Pretzell, an AfD member of the European Parliament, was the star attraction.⁶⁷ According to a report of the event in German weekly *Der Spiegel*, Pretzell said good economic relations with Russia “are in the interest of the German people” and that EU sanctions on Russia should be lifted immediately.⁶⁸ This is in line with AfD leader Frauke Petry’s position “that Germany should take a ‘balanced position’ toward Russia.”⁶⁹ Furthermore, the youth wing of the AfD has formed an alliance with Putin’s United Russia Party’s organization.⁷⁰ And the AfD’s call for a referendum on Germany’s participation in the European Union and its questioning of Germany’s membership in NATO align with Russia’s objectives to weaken the multilateral political and military structure in Europe.⁷¹

Freedom Party of Austria

The Freedom Party of Austria, or FPO, is no newcomer to European politics like the AfD. It dates its lineage back to 1956, when, according to Austrian political scientist Anton Pelinka, it “was founded ... by former Nazis for former Nazis.”⁷² The FPO has undergone numerous transformations over the past 60 years—for example, shifting significantly toward the center in the 1980s to join the center-left Social Democratic Party in government, then a move back to the hard right, which again brought it into coalition with the center-right party, the Austrian People’s Party, in the early 2000s.⁷³ Several party splits have occurred since then, but the FPO is now firmly on the far right of the political spectrum, sharply critical of the European Union and fiercely anti-immigrant and anti-Islam.⁷⁴

In 2016, FPO candidate Norbert Hofer narrowly lost the race to become Austria’s president, a largely ceremonial role even though it would have produced the first elected far-right head of state in Europe since World War II. That year, Austria held two elections because the result of its first was so extremely close, and because of minor vote tabulating irregularities, new elections were called.⁷⁵ The second presidential vote in December came after both the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom and Trump’s win in the United States, and the defeat of the FPO was clearly a major relief for those in Europe concerned by the building wave of far-right populist support.⁷⁶ But the respite may be short-lived in Austria, as the FPO currently leads polling ahead of parliamentary elections in 2018 that will determine the makeup of the next government.⁷⁷

Similar to the Front National, the FPO has long-standing ties to Russia, including alleged financial support, but the FPO denies it receives any funding from Moscow.⁷⁸ In 2010, the FPO hosted a conference in Vienna on the color revolutions that accused the U.S. government of overthrowing the leaders of Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan.⁷⁹

In 2014, the FPO convened another conference in Vienna, which was funded by Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, who has been linked with providing financial assistance to pro-Russian rebels in Ukraine and Crimea.⁸⁰ That conference featured FPO leader Heinz-Christian Strache, Marine Le Pen's niece and fellow Front National official Marion Maréchal-Le Pen, and Alexander Dugin.⁸¹ Malofeev's financial backing of the Vienna conference strongly suggests Russian financial support for the FPO, as one of Putin's policy advisers Sergei Markov said Malofeev "suits Russian authorities because they don't want to take responsibility for certain things."⁸²

However, any previous activities pale in comparison to the cooperation pact that FPO leaders agreed to with Putin's United Russia Party in December 2016.⁸³ In the agreement, the FPO pledges to work to end the European Union and U.S. sanctions on Russia, which in its words are "harmful and ultimately useless."⁸⁴ According to Vice News, the FPO went on to say that it wanted "to be 'a neutral and reliable intermediary and partner in promoting peace' between the United States and Russia."⁸⁵ Strache has previously praised and defended Putin as a "pure democrat."⁸⁶ He has also called German Chancellor Angela Merkel "the most dangerous woman in Europe."⁸⁷

U.K. Independence Party

The U.K. Independence Party, or UKIP, was formed in 1993 as a direct response to the 1992 Maastricht Treaty—which established the European Union from the numerous previous incarnations of European multilateral institutions—as a single-issue party calling for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union.⁸⁸ It has attempted to broaden its appeal beyond just Euroscepticism and now casts itself as the anti-establishment, anti-immigrant party that will defend the interests of traditional British working people.⁸⁹

UKIP has gained substantial support across the United Kingdom, obtaining the third-highest vote share in the 2015 general election at 12.6 percent. But it only captured one seat in Parliament because it struggles in the “first past the post” electoral system that the United Kingdom uses for general elections.⁹⁰ It has done much better in European elections, winning the largest vote share at the 2014 European elections, the first time in modern history that a national election in the United Kingdom was not won by either Labour or the Tories.⁹¹

Although it vehemently denied any formal position on the referendum, it was clear that Russia preferred that the United Kingdom choose to leave the European Union in its June 2016 vote.⁹² A major UKIP donor writes of an astonishing tale of meeting “the KGB’s man in London” for a six-hour strategy session on the Brexit campaign.⁹³ And Russia’s use of media and propaganda arms RT and Sputnik, according to an analysis by The Daily Beast, “shows a clear bias towards quoting anti-EU campaigners.”⁹⁴

UKIP’s former leader, Nigel Farage, was a frequent guest on RT, with the network even offering him his own show after he stepped down from the leadership post following the successful Brexit campaign.⁹⁵ Farage would be right at home among RT’s pro-Russian programming, as he has described Putin as the world leader he most admires and said that Putin acted “brilliant[ly]” in Syria.⁹⁶ While Farage has nothing but praise for Putin, he said the European Union “has blood on its hands” for its trade deal with Ukraine, presumably provoking the blameless Putin into his invasion.⁹⁷ And while Putin is his most admired world politician, Farage has said that EU leaders are “the worst people we have seen in Europe since 1945.”⁹⁸ It is also worth noting that Farage has met with President Trump three separate times since Trump’s win in November.⁹⁹

UKIP’s new leader, Paul Nuttall, sought the leadership on an explicitly pro-Putin message, saying in a leadership campaign appearance that Putin was “generally getting it right.”¹⁰⁰ And in an editorial in UKIP Daily titled “Why Russia is a Friend to Post-Brexit Britain,” an anonymous UKIP member under the pen name Morpheus Magnus argued for a strong relationship with Russia.¹⁰¹ Magnus argued that “the EU has become increasingly aggressive towards Russia” and that “NATO/EU told us that we had to bomb Assad,” while “Russian troops went in with a full force and drove out ISIS.”¹⁰²

Party for Freedom

In 2006, Geert Wilders founded the Party for Freedom, or PVV, in the Netherlands, after he broke off from the right-wing People's Party for Freedom and Democracy.¹⁰³ The PVV began its existence as a traditional right-wing party with neoliberal economic policies and hawkish foreign policy views with an emphasis on anti-Muslim policies and rhetoric.¹⁰⁴ Over time, the party evolved to be more in line with other far-right populist parties in Europe, focusing now on withdrawal from the European Union; more populist economic policies; and if possible, even more vehement opposition to Islam and Muslims.

Wilders dominates the PVV, and he and the party are practically indistinguishable. His extreme views on Islam have led to him recently being convicted of inciting racial hatred, but that has not dented his growing popularity in the Netherlands.¹⁰⁵ The PVV had led in polls through most of the buildup to parliamentary elections on March 15, but the party has recently slipped narrowly behind sitting Prime Minister Mark Rutte.¹⁰⁶ The PVV has never been a formal member of a governing coalition but previously supported a coalition of center-right and right-wing parties from 2010 to 2012.¹⁰⁷ Even if Wilders is able to regain his lead, it is far from sufficient to win an outright majority of seats in Parliament, however, and most parties have ruled out forming a coalition government with the PVV.¹⁰⁸

There are fewer direct ties between the PVV and Russia than many other European far-right parties. Wilders and the PVV are strong supporters of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, or LGBT, rights, in stark contrast to the extremely homophobic policies of Russia under Putin. And the downing of a Malaysian Airlines plane by Russian-backed separatists in Ukraine, which took off from Amsterdam and killed 198 Dutch citizens, makes the kind of open and fawning support exhibited by other far-right leaders less evident for Wilders.¹⁰⁹

Russia's disinformation and propaganda arms, however, have been extremely active supporting Wilders. In April 2016, the Dutch held a referendum on a trade agreement between the European Union and Ukraine. A bare minimum of voters turned out to legitimize the vote, and those who did roundly rejected the treaty and, as *Washington Post* columnist Anne Applebaum said, "showed the world how Russia influences Western European elections."¹¹⁰ Nearly one in five voters who rejected the treaty said they did so because they blamed Ukraine for shooting down the Malaysian Airlines flight.¹¹¹ Russia's propaganda arms repeatedly pushed the false story that the Ukrainians were responsible for shooting down the plane.¹¹²

In another shocking incident, a video purportedly showing a notorious Ukrainian militia unit burning a Dutch flag and threatening to conduct terrorist attacks in the Netherlands was spread on social media in January 2016. The video was fake, and its origins have been traced to “St. Petersburg Troll Factories” that develop and spread false stories through social media.¹¹³ Most mainstream Dutch media identified the video as likely fake. But Russia’s propaganda outlet Sputnik pushed the story under the headline “Ukrainian Radicals Plan to Enter EU by Intimidating Europeans.”¹¹⁴

While Wilders has not showered praise on Putin like other far-right leaders, he has adopted the Russian line and pursued policies directly in Russia’s interests. He told the Russian news outlet Izvestia that “[r]estoring ties with Russia is a priority” and “lifting the anti-Russian sanctions is a mandatory condition.”¹¹⁵ It’s extremely hard to explain why a Dutch nationalist would advocate lifting sanctions on Russia that were strengthened in the wake of Russia’s role in causing the death of nearly 200 Dutch citizens.¹¹⁶ Mimicking the Russian view of the Ukrainian government, Wilders said it was run by “National-Socialists, Jew-haters and other anti-democrats.”¹¹⁷ He attacked the European Union as “stand[ing] for war-mongering.”¹¹⁸ And he accused current Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte of having “given Holland away.”¹¹⁹

Five Star Movement and the Northern League

By far the most perplexing of the populist parties aligning with Putin is Italy’s Five Star Movement, or M5S. Founded in 2009 by comedian Giuseppe Piero Grillo to capitalize on the popularity of his blog—which is published in three languages and is among the most visited websites in the world—and his prominent outsider campaigns against corruption, Grillo claims that M5S is neither left nor right.¹²⁰ The anti-establishment movement chose five stars to represent its five most important issues, which include “public water, sustainable transport, sustainable development, the right to Internet access and environmentalism.”¹²¹

That does not sound like the makings of a pro-Putin platform, especially as that space is already occupied in Italy by the neo-fascist Northern League, which has had a long-standing and ongoing relationship with Russia for many years. And prior to 2014, M5S had a negative stance on Russia and Putin.¹²² And Grillo himself had railed against Putin on his blog, particularly following the murder of anti-Putin journalist Anna Politkovskaya, when he urged his readers to buy

her book *Putin's Russia*.¹²³ Now, however, top MSS officials have met with senior figures of Putin's United Russia Party in Moscow and Rome and have called for an end to EU sanctions on Russia, accuse NATO of being "aggressive," have claimed the Ukraine crisis is the fault of the United States and the European Union, and describe the bombing of Aleppo as "liberation."¹²⁴

There is more understandable convergence between Russia and MSS around its call for a referendum on Italy's participation in the Euro currency. But as a Western diplomat put it about the emerging connection between MSS and Russia, "We can't understand why they are on the side of Putin and not Pussy Riot."¹²⁵ It is correct that the anti-establishment bent of the Russian female anti-Putin punk band does resemble Grillo's approach to politics.

A recent BuzzFeed investigative article may explain some of the newfound affinity among Grillo and MSS for Russia. BuzzFeed's analysis found that MSS has "built a sprawling network of websites and social media accounts that are spreading fake news, conspiracy theories, and pro-Kremlin stories to millions of people," including "a collection of profitable sites that describe themselves as 'independent news' outlets but are actually controlled by [MSS] leadership."¹²⁶

Websites operated by MSS reach an audience comparable to Italy's largest daily newspapers and "regularly reproduces headlines and copy directly sourced from Sputnik with the Kremlin's take on world events."¹²⁷ A former Google employee who worked on online advertisements told BuzzFeed, "MSS talks a lot about transparency, but then as part of my job I realised that they are making so much money off this thing ... The leaders of the party are making money with a fake news aggregator."¹²⁸ In response to the BuzzFeed analysis, Grillo tweeted that it was "fake news."¹²⁹

The extraordinary reach of MSS websites and social media accounts is one of the factors that has delivered the party success at the ballot box. It gained nearly 100 seats in the 2013 parliamentary elections and was a leading voice in a successful campaign against a December 2016 national referendum on constitutional reforms that was offered by then-Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. Renzi's resignation in the wake of that defeat has increased the likelihood of new elections before their scheduled February 2018 date, and MSS is running just behind Renzi's center-left Democratic Party in polling.¹³⁰

The party garnering the third-most support in Italy now is the far-right Northern League.¹³¹ Umberto Bossi, an anti-immigrant, xenophobic populist who wanted the industrial north of Italy to secede from the south, founded it as a separatist party in the late 1980s.¹³² During former Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi's years in power, the Northern League at times supported coalition governments and was close to the seat of power.¹³³ But after Berlusconi's departure, support for the party plummeted. It has shed both Bossi, who resigned in 2012 in a corruption scandal, and its separatism, but has kept the xenophobia and is riding new leader Matteo Salvini and a wave of anti-Europe and anti-immigrant sentiment back to prominence.¹³⁴

Russia has extensive connections to the Northern League. Its representatives were invited by Russia as observers in Crimea, and Salvini recognized the validity of the Crimean referendum on joining Russia.¹³⁵ Salvini spoke, in 2015, at a conference in Milan under the billing "Russia and the Crimea: A great opportunity for Italian business in Milan."¹³⁶ And U.S. and British intelligence officials are reportedly investigating the Northern League for receiving covert Russian funding.¹³⁷

Salvini has denied getting any financial backing from Russia, but he makes no secret of his admiration for Putin and Russia.¹³⁸ Salvini has said, "in my opinion Russia represents the future."¹³⁹ On EU sanctions on Russia, Salvini has said, "Nobody understands the motives for the sanctions." According to *The Local*, he believes "that those who 'play war' with Russian President Vladimir Putin are 'idiots.'"¹⁴⁰ The Northern League has even succeeded in getting four regional assemblies in Italy to vote against implementing the sanctions.¹⁴¹

The Northern League under Salvini is also strongly anti-Europe and anti-establishment. Salvini has said, "the Europe of today cannot be reformed. There's nothing to be reformed in Brussels. It's run by a group of people who hate the Italian people and economy in particular."¹⁴² The main plank in the Northern League's platform is withdrawing from the euro, the common currency of many countries in the European Union.¹⁴³ The Northern League joined *M5S* and other parties and campaigned hard against the December 2016 referendum.¹⁴⁴ When the results were announced, Salvini tweeted in Italian, "Long live Trump, long live Putin, long live Le Pen and long live the League!"¹⁴⁵

Trump following same playbook as European far right

Much has already been written and a great deal more remains to be learned about Russia's actions during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Even President Trump has now admitted—extremely reluctantly—that Russia was responsible for the hack of Democratic political organizations and figures.¹⁴⁶ And media reports indicate that U.S. counterintelligence agents are investigating Russia's actions, including examining ties between the Kremlin and several Trump campaign officials.¹⁴⁷

The fallout from these contacts has already had a major impact on the Trump administration. Trump's first national security adviser, former Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, was forced to resign in February 2017 following revelations that he had spoken with Russia's U.S. ambassador multiple times on the day President Barack Obama imposed sanctions on Russia.¹⁴⁸ And Attorney General Jeff Sessions has recused himself from oversight of any Department of Justice investigation of Russia's ties to Trump officials after his own inaccurate claim during his confirmation hearing that he had never met with any Russian official during the 2016 presidential campaign.¹⁴⁹

While those investigations remain ongoing and are being conducted outside public view, it is possible to examine Trump's positions and statements on issues related to Putin and Russia. What becomes immediately clear is that the positions of Trump and European far-right parties receiving overt and covert support from Russia are disturbingly similar.

Trump's consistent praise for Putin was one of the dominant features of the presidential campaign. In just one of many examples that resemble the praise from European far-right leaders, Trump said Putin "has very strong control over a country ... he's been a leader."¹⁵⁰ Trump has spent months deflecting allegations that Russia hacked Democratic political organizations and leaders.¹⁵¹ In language similar to Le Pen's, Trump said after the election, "I know a lot about hacking. And hacking is very hard to prove. So it could be somebody else."¹⁵² And mirroring all European far-right leaders, Trump has repeatedly sought better relations with Russia, saying since his election that "[h]aving a good relationship with Russia is a good thing, not a bad thing. Only 'stupid' people, or fools, would think that it is bad!"¹⁵³

Trump and his team have repeatedly floated removing sanctions on Russia. Trump has said he would keep sanctions “at least [for] a period of time.”¹⁵⁴ But he has also said he is eager to make a deal with Russia that would lead to removing the sanctions.¹⁵⁵ In a tweet, Trump praised Putin’s decision to forgo any retaliatory action to the sanctions imposed by President Obama in December 2016 in response to Russia’s interference in the U.S. election as “very smart,” which was immediately retweeted by the Russian embassy in Washington.¹⁵⁶ It was Flynn’s calls with the Russian ambassador to the United States about these sanctions that led to his resignation.¹⁵⁷

Trump talks about U.S. leaders in the same way as the European far right talks about theirs. Trump’s denigration of American leaders was a major feature of his campaign. He said in August 2016 that “we have people running our country that don’t know what they’re doing, they’re grossly incompetent.”¹⁵⁸ He told a North Carolina audience in October 2016, “We have a bunch of babies running our country, folks ... We have a bunch of losers, they’re losers, they’re babies.”¹⁵⁹ His venom is not directed only at American leaders, as he shares the FPÖ’s Strache’s views of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, assailing her “catastrophic mistake” in accepting Syrian refugees and other asylum seekers fleeing violence in their home countries.¹⁶⁰

In a setback for many across Europe hoping that his attacks on NATO were mere campaign rhetoric, Trump again called NATO “obsolete” in a recent interview.¹⁶¹ Former U.S. Ambassador to NATO Ivo Daalder wrote on Twitter that “Trump is more critical of NATO, EU, & Germany—all close allies—than he’s ever been of Putin & Russia.”¹⁶²

Trump has also been very supportive of Brexit and has suggested that he would prioritize a U.S. trade deal with the United Kingdom as a means of facilitating its departure from the European Union.¹⁶³ Trump has encouraged other nations to also leave, saying “people, countries want their own identity and the U.K. wanted its own identity ... I believe others will leave.”¹⁶⁴ He has also tugged at divisions within Europe, saying that the European Union is a “vehicle” for control by Germany.¹⁶⁵

Trump and his team have also met with many of Europe’s far-right leaders. In the most widely reported example, Trump has met several times with UKIP’s Nigel Farage at Trump Tower following his election and even tweeted that he thought Farage should be the United Kingdom’s ambassador to the United States.¹⁶⁶ In January 2017, Marine Le Pen made a very public visit to Trump Tower, though Trump transition officials denied that a meeting between Trump

and the Front National leader took place.¹⁶⁷ Trump’s chief strategist Stephen “Steve” Bannon did reach out to Marine’s niece Marion after the election in the hopes of “working together,” so a Le Pen-Trump meeting would not be a surprise.¹⁶⁸ The Northern League’s Matteo Salvini met with Trump during the campaign, after which Trump reportedly told him, “Matteo, I hope you will soon become the prime minister of Italy.”¹⁶⁹ And the FPO’s Heinz-Christian Strache has said that he traveled to New York to meet with Flynn following the election, a meeting the Trump transition also denied.¹⁷⁰

As his outreach to the Le Pens makes clear, Bannon is no stranger to Europe’s far right. When he ran the website Breitbart, he gave substantial positive coverage to UKIP, the AfD, and Geert Wilders’ PVV.¹⁷¹ With Trump now in the White House, Breitbart has announced it is expanding deeper into Europe with the launch of new sites in France and Germany.¹⁷² Bannon has even known of Alexander Dugin for some time. At a 2014 conference, he said:

*When Vladimir Putin, when you really look at some of the underpinnings of some of his beliefs today, a lot of those come from what I call Eurasianism; he’s got an adviser [Dugin] who harkens back to Julius Evola and different writers of the 20th century... We ... really have to look at what [Putin] is talking about as far as traditionalism goes, particularly the sense of where it supports the underpinnings of nationalism.*¹⁷³

Recommendations

The United States should undertake the following actions to respond to this Russian threat to America's and our allies' democracies.

Sanctions

The Obama administration imposed a set of sanctions and other punitive actions on Russia for its actions during the 2016 presidential campaign. There is no evidence that Russia has changed its behavior, and there is great concern that it is engaging in similar actions ahead of a series of critical European elections over the next 12 months. Despite this reality, the Trump administration has repeatedly floated lifting the sanctions either as part of a deal with Russia on other issues or simply in their own right. This is unacceptable.

- **Keep sanctions in place if Russian influence operations continue in Europe.** The Trump administration should not lift U.S. sanctions related to Russia's actions in the 2016 presidential election if it is shown that Russia is still engaging in this activity in Europe. There is simply no way that Russia or other hostile foreign powers will be deterred from attacking future U.S. elections if no meaningful punishment is levied against them.
- **Impose additional sanctions on Russia if its actions continue in European elections.** Beyond simply keeping existing sanctions, the Trump administration must take additional steps to protect the integrity of America's and our allies' democracy and impose new sanctions on Russia if its actions continue. This cannot become the new normal. Russian attacks on Western democracies are a genuine threat to the security and prosperity of Americans and our allies and must not go unpunished.

- **Congress should legislate sanctions if the Trump administration is unwilling to do so.** Given President Trump’s allegiance to Russia and Putin in general and his attitude toward the existing sanctions in particular, it appears extremely unlikely that the Trump administration will undertake a serious attempt to impose real penalties on Russia for its actions. Congress must step in and protect the integrity of our democracy, even if the president will not. Congress should pass new sanctions legislation requiring the imposition of sanctions on Russia for continuing interference in the elections of Western democracies based on assessments by the intelligence community.

Information and intelligence sharing

U.S. and allied intelligence agencies are aware of the threat posed by Russia to Western democracies. Information is being shared both with partner intelligence agencies and the public about this new challenge. These efforts should be formalized.

- **Congress should authorize an annual report on Russia’s covert influence operations targeting democracies.** Congress should establish in the Intelligence Authorization Act or other legislation that the director of national intelligence should provide an annual report to Congress detailing Russia’s covert operations targeting Western democracies. This report should be presented in both classified and unclassified versions so that the American people can access this report.
- **Form a committee on democracy at NATO.** NATO was established to protect Western democracies from attack by the Soviet Union. Russia has attacked the democracies of numerous NATO members in an unconventional manner, and NATO must develop a common defense. A new committee on democracy should be formed, or the existing Political Committee should be reformed to adopt the role of developing strategies to protect the integrity of democratic institutions in NATO member states.
- **Establish a joint U.S.-EU Commission on Protecting Democracy.** A number of joint U.S.-EU committees and commissions already exist but typically to work out common rules on trade or regulation. A new joint committee should be formed to share information and strategies to defend against Russian attacks on democracies and democratic institutions.

Investigations

The House and Senate Intelligence committees are currently investigating Russia's actions during the 2016 presidential election and any possible collusion between Russia and Trump campaign officials. There also appears to be an ongoing FBI investigation of the Russian penetration of Democratic political organizations and individuals that reportedly is examining what role, if any, Trump campaign officials may have played in the Russian operation.¹⁷⁴ Those investigations are important and should continue, but questions remain about the inherent secrecy of investigations in the intelligence committees and the independence of the criminal probe overseen by top Trump administration officials. As a result, the American people need the following:

- **A bipartisan, independent commission.** It is a hallmark of America's system of government that when major and groundbreaking security incidents occur, they are thoroughly and fully examined in a manner that is as devoid of political interference as possible. The most recent example is the investigation of the 9/11 attacks, which included both a joint congressional investigation and the independent 9/11 Commission. That is what is necessary in this case given the unprecedented nature of a hostile foreign government manipulating our political process with the objective of helping one candidate with possible collusion of that candidate's campaign.
- **A Special Counsel to investigate Trump officials.** Attorney General Sessions' recusal is a welcome and necessary step, but it does not eliminate the appearance of a conflict of interest at Trump's Department of Justice over its investigations into Russia. The Director of the FBI, James Comey, is under investigation by the Department of Justice Inspector General for his actions during the campaign regarding the investigation into Secretary Clinton that appeared to contradict long-standing Department of Justice policy on interfering in elections. Top officials in the Trump White House have reportedly attempted to get the FBI to make public statements clearing Trump campaign officials of any involvement in the Russian operation.¹⁷⁵ The American people can have no confidence that the Trump administration can be trusted to investigate itself. A Special Counsel should be appointed to oversee the investigation.

Conclusion

Chief White House adviser Stephen Bannon's comments about Alexander Dugin and the origins of his thinking are no accident, and Dugin has been ecstatic since Trump's victory. The same man who has said, "the American empire should be destroyed," said after Trump won, "[A]nti-Americanism is over. Not because it was wrong, but exactly the opposite: because the American people themselves have started the revolution against precisely this aspect of the US that we all hated. ... So let us drain the European Swamp. ... What is the structure of the Swamp? First of all, the Swamp is an ideology—Liberalism."¹⁷⁶

Although Dugin's warm feelings toward President Trump should certainly concern all Americans, they do not prove anything on their own. The remarkable similarities between President Trump and the European far right in their views on Putin and Russia are alarming, however. It is possible that these parties are pursuing the same pro-Russia policies and using the same language to praise Putin and denigrate their own leaders because of ideological convergence. But it is difficult to understand why nationalist political parties—that are premised on putting their own countries' interests first—would adopt policies that advance a rival country's interests ahead of their own. It is also possible that this is not merely a coincidence explained away by ideological convergence. If it's the latter, Western democracies need to wake up to the challenge posed by Russia's fifth column in our midst before it is too late.

About the author

Ken Gude is a Senior Fellow on the National Security and International Policy team at the Center for American Progress.

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